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Dangers of social media through the example of the Arab Spring

Péter Bányász

PhD Student

banyasz.peter@gmail.com

National University of Public Service Faculty of Military Sciences and Officer Training major
in Military Engineering

Abstract

The events and changes called the Arab Spring occurred in the Middle East have been studied by many point of view. Most of the studies described the events as the revolution of the social media. This article is intended to demonstrate the political changes by accepting this statement as well as exceeding it.

Key words: Social Media, Arab Spring, political system change, Middle East, information warfare

The early year of 2011 is relevant in many ways for our topic. Series of protests occurred in Tunisia - late 2010 – peaked in the spring of 2011 resulting series of system changes in Middle East. There was however another event which barely reached the stimulus-threshold, yet it had/could have a great significance in the states internal affairs and sovereignty. In February 2011 the Boston newspaper Raw Story discovered an interesting tender which have been invited by the US Air force: to create an online identity management software in order to form an army of fake users which than can affect a given states internal affairs in extreme cases result political system change or start a revolution using the social media. After the tender took air undesired the Military removed the tender invite and refused to give any explanation about the aim of the project to the vox populi due to national security reasons [1]. We don't know if they have created such software in the end therefore there is no information of the usage of it. However it raises a lot of serious theoretical questions. The aim of this article is to answer these questions using the Arab Spring as some kind of illustration. Using only public data we don't and we can't claim that the changes in the Arab countries were the results of such artificial intervention. This however does not exclude the possibility of such events in the future. The history of social media which is barely a decade old doesn't make it

evident for the elder generations – so called digital immigrants¹ – to consider this new instrument as a real threat as in many cases they don't understand its significance and effects. This statement is not only valid for the older generation of course². The social media means numerous threats for our security which can't be discussed due to length limits but we will deal with it tangentially.

During thousands of years of warfare history there was often an inequality between combatants. This kind of inequality could be originated from economic, technical, numeric superiority. Modern warfare is however shifting towards IT operations which allow the combatants to use –theoretically- the same equipment: computers. The importance of information warfare is proved in the Estonian-Russian cyber war³ in 2007 or the paradigm changing use of the Stuxnet virus⁴ against the particle accelerator in Natanz which delayed the Iranian uranium enrichment program by two years.

The social media can be the source of numerous threats such as phishing originated from negligence, attacking critical infrastructure, violation of national suzerainty and in extreme cases it can fully change a given states domestic arrangements⁵.

Before turning to the key question our subject, after a long introduction that how a state can influence political decision-making of another state and government structure using the social media- staying with the Stuxnet analogy: even without a single shot⁶, let us review briefly what social media is. Social media is the mass of online applications built on web 2.0's technological and ideological foundations [8]. The easiest way to compare web 2.0 and the traditional web is to analyze the content creation method. While in the past the contents of a

¹ The concept of Digital Immigrants, Digital Natives was created by Mark Prensky [2]. By this we mean a definition in which he ascribes completely different socialization and learning skills to the individual generations. Studies show that Digital Natives 'speak' this new language on a level that there is change in their brain structure so called Google-effect [3].

² Meaning the irresponsibility, naivety of the users, giving away loads of their personal data in many cases to hostile end-users. The same is true for young and elder people.

³ The Estonian-Russian conflict was started with a soviet monument transfer which started riots, the wrecking of the diplomatic relations of the two countries and a cyber-attack so intense that the critical Estonian infrastructure (mainly the bank system, government, administration) was crippled for weeks resulting enormous economic damage[4].

⁴ The virus itself was an incredibly complex intelligence and information operation which allowed the attackers to delay the military/peaceful (interpretation issue) program with years which otherwise Israel intended to close with conventional war at the level of political communication [5].

⁵ To read further details about the threats presented by social media see Peter Bányász: The role of social media in the armies of the 21th century [6].

⁶ We are not dealing with economic sanctions and other pressure instruments in this article, because they can be indicated and traced. An excellent example of the topic is Orsolya Milován's study: 'Eszmékért és elvekért harcolunk...' which analyzes the 2004 Ukrainian elections [7].

web page has been produced by the service provider, in the case of web 2.0 the content is produced by the users, the service provider only provide the framework.

The tools of social media are the different kind of social networking sites (e.g. Facebook), the video and photo sharing sites (e.g. YouTube or Picasa), blogs and microblogs (e.g. Blog.hu or Twitter) but I have to mention Google too since it has long provides more than just searching functions⁷.

These user created contents than shared, commented, modified, corrected by other users which can change the original content.

After the clarification of the conceptual questions we should look at the U.S. Army Air Force's tender. The program summarized by creating a robot army which registrates fake user accounts on social networking sites. For this however is necessary to solve numerous problems that are identified in the tender documents. Let us examine them briefly.

First of all thus created accounts must have authentic legends according to the field of operation since the whole operation would be discredited if a large number of 'Csángó' identity fake users would write blogs or give their support for political movements, who would otherwise should be Egyptian/Tunisian/Libyan/Moroccan residents. It is no coincidence that Iran's political leadership has decided to develop its own Internet network and shut down the country step by step from the global Internet network⁸, for they have experienced the mobilizing power of social devices. If you have the legend than you have to develop such defense that will allow the software to randomly change the operator's IP address (unique Internet Online Access Id) to protect the operators identity as well as giving the fake users a static IP address, this will make the illusion that the user is logging in from the same computer. It was a condition to establish virtual servers too (VSP's), which the Raw Story assumes can fool a variety of geolocation services, so if someone begins to investigate may believe that the virtual target is sitting right where its legend says.

If we have this kind of robot army we just have to wait and if it is necessary, create the conditions of an event which may trigger the response operations. History has shown that the various intelligence agencies can be very creative when it comes to 'black-ops'⁹. In the case of Arab Spring for example a fruit and vegetable vendor set himself on fire to protest against

⁷ Google covers a broad spectrum of open source intelligence, which can be illustrated with Google Maps and Google Earth. The earlier mentioned Youtube, Picasa and the popular Blogspot too belongs to Google.

⁸ Think of the recently announced Google incident (the company owns Youtube video sharing site) in which there was a slandering video of Prophet Muhammad, but the truth is that they wanted to weaken the power of social medias' influence. Of course, it should not be overlooked that a large number of Iranian officials use Google's email service, Gmail, which regularly monitors the email marketing purposes in [9].

⁹ The "black operation" are black action events which go beyond the framework of legally enforceable actions. For example when the American Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms has given firearms to Mexican drug cartels to monitor the Mexican weapon smuggling lines. Such an operation, in most cases, of course, only to hear, if it fails and results a scandal as in the previous case [10].

corruption, which resulted protests and demonstrations on social community sites. People organized political movements and protests before the spread of cell phones and the Internet, but the social media has opened a new dimension. The cause can be finding in the countries demographic data, as you can see the strongest tension source of the region is the large number of younger people. And these young people have a higher skill to use the internet¹⁰.

But how does it work to organize such a protest. First of all someone must create a group/fan page/event on the topic. In this case say a protest against corruption or to ensure political liberties. After this notifications must be sent to more and more people. The more people willing to support it the more relevant the event will be. Not only one can present this support, but with further conspirational activity a wider publicity can be ensured for the agenda. The electronic and also the traditional media likes to refer to the community instruments. One of the main reasons is that the communication is real time on the community sites. The electronic news sites can compete with this feature but the traditional media doesn't stands a chance. The fact that the large number of participants can report an event as they are experiencing it increases the power of social media even further¹¹. If however we have a mass of artificial users, we don't have to leave the presentation of support to the chances. Of course in a case like this the support is not mainly presented in the given country's media, as in dictatorial states the media is under strong state control, but it can count on the global public awareness. Winning the sympathy of the international public opinion¹² can result numerous actions. In Egypt the scale of protests removed president Mubarak Hosni from his chair¹³, Mohamer Khadafi was removed from power by civil war which was fueled by UN intervention with NATO operations pressed by international public opinion [13].

Social media is not only used to organize protests, but military operations were also recorded with mobile devices¹⁴ and these recordings have been presented on many video sharing sites

¹⁰ As it appeared in the study of Peter Seljan: 'Tunisia, where the average age is 30 years, 23% of the 10million population are under the age of 14. In Egypt, where the average age is 24 years, 33% of the country's population -84 million- are under 14. Cell phones are common in both countries, in Tunisia 93 out of 100 people has mobile subscriptions, while in Egypt 67 of 100 people owns a cell phone. Moreover the government censored the media which led people to inform on the internet. Internet usage is significant in both countries. 25 percent of the population is Tunisia and 10 percent of the populations in Egypt have used the Internet. More than the halves of the internet users are under the age of 34 [11].

¹¹ As a Pakistani resident did, who not knowing the real reason live-broadcasted the encounter of Osama Bin Laden on Twitter [12].

¹² Of course you should treat the international public opinion with reservation, since given regions, states influence the public opinion according to their political interests. Staying in the Middle East the interests in Syria is different on the U.S, Russian, Chinese parts, as they use different 'idea crutches' to influence their residents.

¹³ It would be naive to assume that this change would take place so smoothly if the United States – which forms a strong political alliance relationship with the country- did not have the blessing of transition.

¹⁴ A smart phone is capable to record a video or take a picture in a resolution of at least 720p, which results very high quality images.

to show unvarnished brutality. In many cases the major commercial TV channels have alluded to and presented these videos. This trend is typical in present day Syria, where there is an ongoing civil war. The Syrian insurgents deliberately used social media tools to gain supporters to their cause so far unsuccessfully¹⁵.

A variety of blogs represents another tool of social media. If we want to raise a topic in our own interest than we have means to it. In a particular case for example if we want to stir up protests in the country it's enough to write blog posts and comments, which can be communicated to be more relevant with the robot army mentioned before. Marketing experts regularly use the procedure that in a case of an advertisement post they hire paid commenters¹⁶ who can then write positive or negative comments according to the marketers goals. But we don't have to look hard to find the same procedure in the political world.

Social networking sites are often accused that they were made by intelligence services active in that region to ease data collection process. Whether this assumption is true or not, we have to acknowledge that users voluntarily give up all of their personal details, providing their messaging, private photos, chatting to the 'listening' authorities. In case of Facebook there were numerous scandals where private user data was illegally given to advertisers. How much time would it take for the secret service to gain access to these informations in the name of the fight against terrorism? But this aspect is not what gives the relevance to social networking sites –according to our topic-. The vast majority of users believe that the shared contents seen on social networking sites (articles, videos, records) are visible in real time. The reality however is that the majority of social community sites (Facebook, Google) preserves the users' search history, frequently issued interactions between users and tries to predict the users' preferences with a mathematical algorithm and by this it selects the content highlighted in sharings¹⁷.

Think about it if all of this are used by secret services to effectively display articles, opinions, propaganda, to influence public opinion, what kind of results they can achieve.

One of the basic functions of social media is division, which with enough conspiracy can be perfectly used for generating panic with the methods discussed above. But not just for generating panic but the influencing of policy-making. The Obama administration and the European Union itself were forced to withdraw the bill on internet censorship, under the

¹⁵ Presumably the international public opinion can't be convinced about an international intervention –as in Egypt or Lybia- because there are geopolitical conflict of interests among the members UN Security Council, which rules out the UN or any other countries to intervene.

¹⁶ : Of course there's no necessary need of payed commenters, it's enough to have a person with multiple registrations. The software discussed in this article makes this easier.

¹⁷ If for example we click on a friend's Al Jazeera shares on a regular basis, the Al Jazeera related contents will be overrepresented in our newsfeed. But the algorithm does not only works with content providers, but it also used to predict our political bond, our world view, preferences to provide the most personalized content for us. This is mainly for promotional purposes, but it's not difficult to see it also can be used for other purposes.

pressure of internet users using social media¹⁸. The users issued an ‘attack’ with the help of the infamous internet group called Anonymous, which was used to win the support of the public opinion as well as they used hacker ‘attacks’ against companies supporting the bill.

Lot of hacker ‘attacks’ are related to the Anonymous groups¹⁹, but they have played a significant role in the Arab Spring which is related to our topic. Governments experiencing higher level of organization on social media and the spreading of demonstrations have decided to shut down internet service. The Anonymous members, who define their goal by the protection of internet and human rights provided technical support in response – in case of Libyan rebels and in the case of protests at Iranian elections – creating the possibility of further telephone and internet communication.

Social media as we could see can be used as a variant of cyber-attack. The biggest problem of cyber-attacks is that the subject is not regulated by international law. Although there are ongoing negotiations to establish an appropriate legal framework, but the source of the attack is hard to trace. Now not only a country’s critical infrastructure can be paralyzed with methods like this, but the sovereignty of a state can be strongly impeded too. And the principle of international law is not to interfere with the countries internal affairs. The Arab Spring has shown how political change can be achieved with the use of social media. If it just happened spontaneously, wondering when and where the moment will come when a state attacks another state using social media. After the Stuxnet attack became public and after several mutated virus are detected, the cyber-security experts eager to know: who will issue the next attack. Same goes for dangers represented by social media, with the crated possibility of an attack, sooner or later someone will use it.

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¹⁸ See the famous ACTA, SOPA cases [14].

¹⁹ Don’t forget that the famous Anonymous group was formed by the members of a forum called „4chan” which launched several attacks over the years in order to influence the internal decision making process of different nations and in many cases they did succeed [15].

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